

Dave Spencer

David L. Spencer
Oral History Interview #2
(continuation of Interview #1)
December 11, 1999
Anchorage, Alaska

*[please note: difficult at times to hear and understand Dave –
unfortunately, Dave passed away before the tapes were transcribed and he
had a chance to edit]*

Interviewed by Jim King and Bruce Conant

Jim: Here we are again at the home of Dave Spencer, along with Bruce Conant, and Eloise. It is a beautiful sunset over the Kenai Peninsula. I was reminding Dave that when we talked six weeks or so ago, we talked about waterfowl but we never got around to talking about how the oil industry invaded the Kenai Moose Range. I went back and looked up Albert Day's book where he describes it as almost like a stab in the back when Secretary of Interior McKay, in the Eisenhower Administration, opened up the refuges for oil. I think the Kenai was one of the first ones.

Dave: It probably was. This move was to get into the Kenai and to get rid of the Kenai Moose Range altogether. This was put forth by the environmental newspaper, anti-environmental newspaper, the Atwood TIMES. He tried to get rid of it but I think that maybe Dr. Gabrielson intervened here. By then he may have been Director. He knew all about the Kenai. He traveled all over it. He wrote the *Birds of Alaska*. He knew all about these things. He was very instrumental in setting up the Kenai National Moose Range and also the Kodiak Refuge. That was in 1941, just before WWII got to diverting everybody. He was a good Washington man with limited means. He had set these things up because of his personal friendship with the President, I think FDR at that time. I have some carbon copies of correspondence from the Library in Denver. They describe the behind the scenes maneuvering. He said he thought he had the President persuaded to set these refuges up.

Dr. Gabrielson was about to see them go down the drain when Atwood was trying to get rid of them. He wanted a step by step report on what was going on up here. I sent him all the clippings from the paper. He had quite a lot of political influence. He diverted Atwood off somewhere else.

Jim: Just looking at Albert Day's book, he sort of implied that the oil industry was going into private land in Oklahoma and Texas. Apparently there were no environmental regulations. They scattered their junk all over the place and just spilled their fluids out on the ground. Suddenly coming into a refuge, you did have authority to demand some cleanliness. You had some say over them.

Dave: At that point, somewhere along the line, I guess they changed refuge managers. They put John Hakala in there as Refuge Manager of the Kenai. He was a real hard-nosed Finn. Right off the bat, he comes in and looks around and wants to suspend operations. We had basic regulations that they had to conform. He imposed those regulations on them right down the line. They didn't know what to do. Nobody had ever talked to them that way before!

Jim: I remember hearing a story about these PR men from the oil industry coming into the office in Kenai. At first they would talk to you, Dave. They always had a lot of these "glad handed" jokes to tell, etc. They would pull out all their bags of tricks to soften up the conversation and you would sit there and never respond whatsoever and then send them in to see John. John would start laughing when they went in to see him. They didn't have to say anything, and John would just laugh at them. They would leave scratching their heads.

Dave: They brought me in a turkey for Thanksgiving. I handed the turkey back to them and told them that I was sorry, I couldn't accept the turkey or any gifts. Later, they enlisted that fellow at Alaska Sales and Service, I forget his name, to try to bribe me somehow. He took me out to dinner but I told him they couldn't buy me off with dinner and a martini. I kind of figured it out in short order and I dug in my heels.

Jim: That was always part of the game for them – lots of martinis, dinners, cigars, and all that stuff.

You remember Art Skinner used to have a gun shop in Juneau. He lived in Texas and I remember him talking one time, in the 1960's, that the Kenai was the cleanest oil field that he had ever seen and he had seen lots of them. He thought it was great. It was you and John Hakala that kept it clean because the oil industry didn't know what dirt was.

Dave: There was a stand of mountain hemlock right about where they drilled a discovery well and I thought that was strange.

Jim: I remember a story where you made them move their initial drill site away from the hemlocks or something. They had to move it several hundred yards. They had had a few dry holes so you actually picked the spot where they finally struck oil.

Dave: I think they were too close to the Swanson River when I told them they had to move away from there.

Jim: That occupied a lot of your time there for a few years.

Dave: Yes. We spent an awful lot of time on that.

Jim: I think I am right in saying that you guys set a pattern on the Kenai that other refuge managers in other parts of the country looked at when they got hit with the oil people.

Dave: I spent some time down in Louisiana with Johnny Lynch. Did you ever meet him?

Jim: Yes, I didn't work with him but I met him at meetings for a few years.

Dave: His wife was a “died in the wool” Cajun. Her name was Zoë. Bruce knew them well. I spent one Christmas there. I went out to her ancestral home in the bayous. Everything was up on stilts. They all got drunk on holidays then they all got to fighting among themselves. Johnny and I figured this was a bum place for us so we got out of there and ran somebody’s _____ line. We were pulling it through the marshes. The Cajun gumbo was quite good. I’ve always tried to duplicate the Cajun coffee but I was never able too.

Bruce: I remember going over to Johnny’s to go out and do the snow goose age-ratio counts. I would drive over there at 4:00 in the morning because we would have to get out there by daybreak. He would say, “well, would you like a cup of coffee.” I’d say, “oh yes, that would be good.” The first clue was when he brought this little tiny cup out and he poured this stuff in there that poured out kind of like maple syrup – wow – was that strong coffee! I didn’t have any trouble staying awake the rest of the day.

Dave: The big deal down there was to get a burlap sack of oysters and a case of beer. We would just sit down and shuck these oysters. They were astonished that I didn’t have an oyster knife. They got me an oyster knife and I still have it!

Bruce: Johnny was quite a guy. If you could get a tenth of what he had in his brain down on paper or on a tape, you would really have something.

Dave: I worked with him in Saskatchewan for awhile. I think he hit the sauce too much but at any rate, his name lives on as a Lynch Foundation. He was a great horticulturist. He was really into raising all kinds of orchids.

Bruce: He had such a lively, active mind. He was interested in everything.

Jim: I heard the story about him where the Department of Agriculture put some kind of poison in his orchid house to kill the fire ants and he sued them, saying the poison had

damaged his orchids. The USDA looked all over the world for an orchid expert that would refute what John Lynch was saying about orchids and there was nobody in the world that would refute him. I don't know if that is a true story or not.

Bruce: That's the story that he told me. He had great fun telling the story. He said the fancy lawyers showed up and told the USDA that they had better settle out of court with him. They didn't want to go to court with Johnny. A good challenge was the sort of thing that Johnny enjoyed.

Jim: He had a way of thinking like a duck! He always looked at things from the duck's point of view.

Bruce: He's the guy that told me, "if you want to understand birds, you got to get up in the air then you can start to understand them."

Dave: Johnny flew little Pipers. Bob Smith was holding fort too. He was probably one of the earliest waterfowl survey fellows. He operated a Piper. Somewhere along the line, we wound up with an L-5, which was a big two-placer. I flew it for quite awhile out of the Delta Waterfowl Research Station there in Manitoba. I would just land in the pasture there. One time we got over to Saskatchewan and that is where Johnny and I did a lot of surveys.

A fellow by the name of Floyd Thompson, an enforcement agent was there. We set up these transects all over southern Saskatchewan and we flew like crazy, back and forth. We probably covered 100% of the area. We would take off early in the morning, fly until dark and then go home and figure out all these things in longhand. I still have those big long sheets that we put all this stuff down on. It was a little too much for Floyd but I was determined I was going to do this. In the winter we would go down to Mexico.

I signed on as a pilot-biologist for the Florida Keys. I knew I didn't want to go there but I felt this was an entry point. We spent quite a bit of time there. We surveyed Mexico

two or three times. I remember once with George Saunders, he had been down there a lot with a 1-ton panel truck. He drove around and he knew where the likely spots were that we hadn't seen from the air. We went all the way to Panama. We had to get special clearance to go through the Panama Canal. He had a mission to make a cursory survey of Guatemala to see what sort of wildlife habitat there was just recording it from the air.

Guatemala City is up pretty high and we took off from there. Every once in awhile, we would fly over these high ridges which just about strained the ceiling on the Wigeon. While there, he made the acquaintance of a lady. We had been there for some time and finally I figured out that George didn't care whether we ever left there or not! It so happened, they got married and to this day, they are still down there in Florida. I hear from them regularly. I just recently had a card from him and he said that would probably be the last time that he would write, as he was way into his 90's.

George always insisted that we take parachutes along while we were flying. I don't know what good they would do because we never got over 200-300 feet!

Bruce: We were just recently visiting with Theron Smith. He was talking about all the old airplanes he had and how he decided to get rid of all the Wigeons. He was saying that he thought that broke your heart when he got rid of the Wigeons and he should have held on to one just for you and he was sorry that he didn't.

Dave: I guess after I flew the Goose for awhile, I thought, "boy, this is some airplane." The Wigeon was sort of a tricky thing.

Bruce: You checked out Bob Smith in the Wigeon, didn't you?

Dave: Yes. He had never flown anything but a single-engine. We were in southern Florida. There were a bunch of old war time abandoned fields there. We practiced on those. He couldn't seem to get on with this twin-engine thing. We would come down and land and then we would go roaring off again. We decided to go on over to Fort

Jefferson. It was a Civil War Fort built entirely of bricks, two stories high that just occupied the whole island. We landed and went inside. It was a national monument. The monument manager had not seen anybody for months. Nobody came out there and so they were delighted to see us and they put on a big spread for us.

They took us barracuda fishing. That was interesting. They would throw something overboard and one of those big fish would grab it and you had your hands full for awhile. Those things get up to five feet long with a frightful set of teeth in them. They were kind of like a salt-water alligator gar.

Jim: I wanted to ask you some more about this wilderness business in Alaska. As I look back, thinking when Atwood and Earnest Gruening and others were trying to dispose of refuges here. Because they had all been created by Executive Order all it would take was an Executive Order to change them. I don't think anybody in Alaska really knew much about the concept of wilderness. We thought we were in it and we needed to conquer it. You brought the idea along that if some of the refuges could be made into wilderness areas by Congress, that would be just as good as having a congressional establishment of the refuge. You began to work with Clarence Rhode on that didn't you?

Dave: Yes. As I told a group once, I was sure Clarence wasn't on their list as a conservationist but his solution to the wolf problem was to go out and shoot them. One thing that Clarence did believe in was refuges. He especially set them up. The fact that he lost his life on a mission up there showing the Arctic Range to influential politicians was too bad.

The Wilderness Act came along. As you said, nobody knew much about the Wilderness Act but we dug into that. I set up three of them. I appointed Will Troyer as the Wilderness Act Coordinator. Will was like a bull in a china shop. When he got into something, he really dug into it and that's what he did with this Wilderness Act. He conducted these necessary studies in fairly short order and put out the pamphlets, etc. He

had a staff of co-workers that worked with him on that. I think there were several of them but I don't remember their names.

Jim: You did some of those studies too. I remember you coming through Juneau on your way to Forester Island.

Dave: Yes and I did Hazy Islands and St. Lazaria Islands.

Jim: Nobody paid any attention to those Islands for years. I think the first thing that I ever knew about why they were refuges was looking at your wilderness report on those.

Dave: They had been set up a long time ago, in 1909, I think. I went down to Forester Island and I poked around down there. My memory is getting pretty ragged. I can't recall many of those things anymore.

Jim: About the time you were getting involved with wilderness areas, the Alaska Conservation Society and Bob Weeden, Celia Hunter and that bunch were kind of organizing. They turned into sort of an ali in supporting the idea of wilderness.

Dave: Yes, and there was the Wilderness Society.

Jim: So, my theory is correct that you got the wilderness idea really launched in Alaska and got a lot of people thinking about it, including Clarence. He didn't think about wilderness much I don't think. He thought mostly about airplanes!

Dave: We had the three of them – Izembek, Arctic Range, and Yukon Delta. That was a huge withdrawal out on the Yukon Delta. This was in E.W. Nelson's time. Then it all was expanded again with ANILCA in 1980.

Jim: There were two islands originally at Hazen Bay. One of them washed away.

At some point back there, you started working on the musk ox. How did that come about?

Dave: I went out there first in 1949 or 1950. They had stocked these musk ox out there sometime before as sort of a safe keeping place. They were trying to eventually restock them. There were only just a few; I think 40 or so. I went out there for years and counted them. I may have written a paper. I would fly and fly until I could account for every damn one of them! This went on for several years. Finally, they began to increase.

Jim: Then you and several others wrote that paper about America's greatest goose-brant colony. You described it as one colony. Now when you talk to the refuge biologists out there, they have the thing organized into a bunch of colonies with vacancies in-between. That is a pretty diagnostic change that has happened over the years. What was one colony is now half a dozen remnants.

Dave: Due to habitat change, probably. There were lots of negotiations regarding the spring waterfowl hunting out there. I guess they were instructed to go easy out there on enforcement. I think Jim Branson was an enforcement agent and had jurisdiction over that area. I think he resigned because he didn't want anything to do with an outfit that didn't enforce the laws. I think he quit and went over to commercial fisheries with the high seas fisheries.

Jim: The thing that happened when I was out there at the refuge headquarters was when State Senator Ray Christensen sent a letter to all the villages saying it was all right for them to hunt in the spring. It was on State stationery signed by a state senator. Neil Argy, Milt Zahn, Ray Tremblay and a bunch of the game agents came up to the refuge house where we were living and we had this talk about this letter. We went to see Ray Christensen and he said that he had contacted Senator Gruening and he said it was O.K. to hunt. We called Ray Woolford in Portland and informed him of the letter that we had to contend with and that we needed somebody higher up than us to say that the letter was wrong. That is when everybody went home.

Woolford said he would either get something out of Washington or just drop it. All these guys said they were leaving and that would leave me there all alone. Woolford suggested that I go into Anchorage for a couple of weeks. I thought that over and of course, I had the family there with two babies so I decided not to go. Nothing happened after all. The only possible consequence was when the mosquitoes got bad, Samuelson would spray DDT around. He sprayed so much on our house that it was dripping down the windows. Later, I wondered if he was thinking this would be a way to get rid of us! Actually, we got along fine with him.

Dave: I came in there to Bethel in the Wigeon. I just wanted to get supper and then I was going on out on the Delta. I looked around the bank there and I saw a good sturdy cable sticking out and so I tied the Wigeon to that. Then when I got ready to leave, I forgot to untie it and I pulled the stake out. I pulled out the whole antennae system for Alaska Airlines. I got out and cut myself loose and got out of there as fast as I could.

When I first went into Bethel there was a dirt/sand runway there right by the bend in the river. If you were careful, you could squeeze a Wigeon into that.

Jim: I spent quite a bit of time there in Bethel at the Roadhouse when they were building the refuge headquarters. They had the best Roadhouse cook in Alaska. They had a barge crew in there one time when I was staying there. The chairs were so close together that you couldn't get your elbows out and she would start putting these dishes on the table. The people would pass them around and by the time she got through passing the food, there wasn't near enough room to set them down. If you got caught with a dish, you had to sit there and hold it for awhile.

In the mornings, I would wait until the construction crew got through breakfast before I would go down. One morning I got up and went into the bathroom and came back and sat down on my bed. There was kind of a crunch. The leg of my cot went through the floor. I got up and pulled this thing out of the floor and looked down and all the

construction workers were looking up from the table from down below. We had a lot of fun around those places in those days.

We had a good meeting a couple of days ago when a bunch of the pilots got together. We were hoping you would be able to be there with us.

--end of Side A, Tape 1—

--start of Side B, Tape 1—

Jim: Dave is telling us some of his flying stories. We will continue for awhile and when Dave gets tired, we will stop and watch the video. Thinking back to the days when you used the kneepad and a pencil. You should see what these guys are doing now.

Dave: Well, I have a story about that too. When I first started this duck survey thing, we needed something to record on better than our kneepad. We bought a wire recorder which was the only type of recorder that there was then. It was a very complex device. We felt we had to protect it. We had a box constructed, lined and padded and we put our recorder in there. Suddenly a big cloud of smoke came out of the back of the Wigeon. This thing was about to catch fire. We quick landed in an abandoned wartime satellite field. We got this box outside and unpacked it and sure enough it was our recorder.

When I first came to Alaska in 1948, I had been doing a lot of flying down in the lower 48 states doing waterfowl surveys. I came up here and I sort of gravitated to where the airplanes were which happened to be at Lake Hood. International Airport was no where in sight. There was nothing there. Lake Hood had a collection of ancient radial engine airplanes. I was there looking around. Fish and Wildlife had a place there. They had quite a large lot on Lake Hood. Slim Bragg was the aircraftman. He was holding fort out there on this plot of land. I told him that I would be occupying a house down at Kenai. There was no road down to Kenai at that time. He said, "I know where that place is and if you like, I will run you down and take a look at it." I think he had a Fairchild 14, a

four-place floatplane. We got down there and landed in the river. He had a kid to watch the plane for us and we went up and looked at the house. It was an old Alaska Commission House. It had no electricity, no plumbing and not much of anything else. We lived in that house for five years.

Slim was out there at Hood Lake all by himself on this plot of land. There was no shelter from the cold and wind or anything else. All my mechanical work that I had done was kind of catch as catch can. It was tough to find a mechanic who could handle it when you needed one.

Jim: That was before Smitty showed up to start putting a real face to the operation.

Dave: Yes, Smitty was out in Bethel, I think, as the Northern Consolidated chief or agent.

Bruce: Do you remember when Smitty came in to run the aircraft division?

Dave: Oh, yes. That was around 1949. Tom Wardleigh was soon hired to take care of the affairs of the shop. By this time, they managed to get some sort of a roof over themselves out there. He posted a sign on the door that read "Come on in and talk to the mechanic all you want, the price is 10 cents a minute."

Jim: It is interesting the crew that Clarence or whoever put together in those years. A lot of the people are still active and doing interesting things. We went out yesterday and visited Tom Wardleigh and Ginny Hyatt and showed them this video. They were busy putting a briefing statement together for Senator Stevens about something or other. The telephones were ringing and people were coming in. Gee, this is 50 years after what you are talking about. Tom probably gets more than 10 cents a minute now!

Dave: I was flying along in this L-4 which was kind of a sorry excuse for an airplane. I was up Killey River surveying along the timberline and all of a sudden the engine quit. I

thought I would just plop it into the river and then I thought I might make it to Harvey Lake. I just barely did but I was stripping down the treetops. I couldn't make the lake but I made the swamp at the end of it. There was an old cabin there and I got word to the FAA that I was going down and where I was. There was a Navy plane going from Kodiak to Anchorage and they diverted that plane to fly over to see if we were O.K. They made a couple of passes and threw out a bunch of stuff that contained some very good winter gear. We were sure glad to have that. They also threw out cigarettes and chewing gun and a few other things. We packed all this stuff plus what we had of our own up to this cabin. The next day, Smith and Wardleigh came down. I think it was about Wardleigh's first exposure to Alaska flying condition. But they made it down and they fixed my problem. There was ice in the gas line. It was about dark and we taxied down to the end of the lake and we got into about a foot of overflow on the water and we got stuck. We stayed overnight in the cabin again and the next morning, we chopped our way out of the ice.

Bruce: What are your recollections with Clarence Rhode?

Dave: He was a very good administrator. He kept things in hand pretty well. He didn't have formal training in wildlife management or anything like that. He didn't have a great knowledge of flying in Alaska. He was a pretty good friend. He was a believer in the refuge system and he did all he could do to set some of the refuges up which probably included Izembek. It was called the Clarence Rhode Range and is now known as the Yukon Delta.

Jim: Pretty important places. When I was out at Bethel last spring, I was glad to see that they have a little plaque there explaining how the refuge had been called Clarence Rhode Refuge and how it had been added to and the name changed but it was also remembering his part out there. It bothers me that his name is disappearing in Alaska. We are getting quite a few of these oral history recordings now so maybe that is going to make it possible for some of the names to survive a little longer.

They made a video of this meeting last week. It was a panel discussion over there at Merrill Field. They had us all lined up on a stage and looking at all the pilots there, around 40 or so. Jerry Lawhorn started it off. He had some good jokes and got everybody chuckling and it just went over real good. They videotaped the whole thing. Some people told stories and it was nice. Your name, Dave, came up a few times and some other people that weren't there. We sat there for about 4 hours. They didn't even give us a break.

There were so many capable people around in that operation that I always think that Clarence Rhode put it together. You put the refuge part of it together and Smitty put the aviation part of it together. It was quite an impressive crew when you think about it. There was a lot of work done with some funny old airplanes and funny old radios. We didn't even talk to the FAA there for years.

Dave: We operated on surplus junk all the time.

Bruce: Smitty talked about that a lot.

Jim: I will shut down this recording now. Thanks a lot, Dave. This is fun to get some of these memories on tape. Mary Smith is working on transcribing these for us. She lives over near Jerry Lawhorn. He has been talking to her about transcribing these tapes.

Dave: Yes, Mary. I always admired that woman. She survived some cantankerous regional directors somehow or another but somehow everything went smooth, smooth, smooth.

Jim: She trained more regional directors than anybody else in the Service! I guess she still keeps interested in the old outfit. She doesn't work painfully at these tapes. She just does the transcribing as she feels like it.

--end of interview--

Tape transcribed by:

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P.S. Transcriber's Note:

As I mentioned at the end of Interview #1, it was certainly my honor and privilege to have known and worked with Dave from 1971 until he retired from the Service. I would see or talk with him occasionally after that. He always had time to say hello or to visit. Dave contributed so much in shaping the Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska as we know it today. Thank you, Dave. May God be with you.